

## Caring for Special Foods

Lunch choices are no longer limited to sandwiches and potato chips. There are an increasing number of convenience products on the market that are packaged in single-service containers and require no refrigeration until opened. Canned spaghetti, ravioli, and puddings are just a few examples. However, once the package is opened, the foods become potentially hazardous and should be eaten or refrigerated promptly.

Keep this in mind if your child comes home with a half-eaten container that he or she "saved for later". These foods may no longer be safe and should be discarded. Check the package label for refrigeration instructions.



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## How to Pack a Safe School Lunch

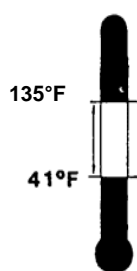


County of San Diego  
Department of Environmental Health  
Food and Housing Division

Packing your child's lunch can be economical, nutritious, and tailored to special preferences. Whatever you decide to serve, here are some hints on how to pack it safely and keep it safe until lunchtime.

## PACKING A LUNCH

The most important factors in packing a lunch are the types of food selected and how they are stored. Harmful bacteria prefer certain type of food, especially those high in protein and moisture, such as meat, fish, poultry, eggs and milk. These types of food are designated as **POTENTIALLY HAZARDOUS**.



To keep these foods safe, they must be kept cold, below 41°F, or hot, above 135°F. The range between 41°F and 135°F is known as the **DANGER ZONE** because harmful bacteria multiply rapidly at these temperatures.

If the **POTENTIALLY HAZARDOUS FOODS** in your child's lunch are kept in the **DANGER ZONE** too long, the bacteria, if present can multiply to a point that may cause a foodborne illness.



## Begin With a Clean Environment

Keeping foods safe begins by keeping your work area clean and organized. Countertops, utensils and *especially* your hands must be clean before preparing food. Thermoses and lunch pails should be cleaned in hot, soapy water, rinsed in clear water and allowed to completely air dry after each use. Disposable lunch bags and plastic sandwich bags, aluminum foil, wax paper and other food wrappings should be disposed of after the first use. They should not be saved or re-used.

## Keeping Foods Cold

The safest way to keep foods cold is to place them under refrigeration immediately after the child reaches school. Unfortunately, many classrooms do not have provisions.

If this is the case, **POTENTIALLY HAZARDOUS FOODS** should be prepared the night before and refrigerated so that they will be cold the next day. Also, if the other foods placed in the lunch box have been refrigerated, they will help keep the potentially hazardous foods cold. For example, boxed juices, sodas, fruit (fresh or canned) can help to keep the lunch box cool when no refrigeration is available. Using insulated lunch bags or freezer ice packs that fit inside lunch boxes can also keep foods cold.

For **cold drinks**, keep the empty thermos in the refrigerator overnight with the lid off.

Make sure the milk or other beverage is cold before placing it in the thermos.

The packed lunch should be stored at school in a cool, dry place, not under a pile of jackets, near a heater or by a sunny window.

## Keeping Foods Hot

The safety way to maintain foods hot such as stews, soups, or chili is to use a hot holding thermos. Check to make sure that the thermos has a tight seal and does not leak. Some thermoses are made specifically for hot or cold foods, but not for both. Check the thermos instructions for more information.

**Soups** should come to a rolling boil before being placed in the thermos. This should be done just before the child leaves for school. The steam should still be visible when the container is opened. Rinsing the thermos first with boiling water will keep the soup even warmer.

